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Martha McMillan Biography

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The [McMillan Journal Collection](#) is an archive of the journals of Martha McMillan of Cedarville, Ohio, who maintained a daily journal from 1867 until her death in 1913.

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Dr. Michelle Wood

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Martha McMillan Biography

The Martha McMillan Journal Collection spans over 10,000 pages within 46 journals, chronicling the events of Martha McMillan's lifetime and constructing a picture of the Cedarville community. This astounding collection of life-writing found its way to Cedarville University by the way of Martha's grandson, Rankin, a former trustee of Cedarville University. His wife Lenora bequeathed the collection to Cedarville's Centennial Library in the 1980s. Martha's own connection to Cedarville University is an intimate one. She attended the first commencement ceremony of the college,¹ and her son Homer was in the first graduating class.² Since receiving the journals, Cedarville University students and faculty have started to transcribe the journals in order to recover and interpret the journals and to make the transcriptions and critical interpretations of the text available to a wider audience. The journals begin on Tuesday, January 15, 1867—Martha McMillan's wedding day. Over the next forty-six years, Martha McMillan records the story of her life, a history of the McMillan family and their home and farm on the pike, as well as an engaging perspective of community life in Cedarville, Ohio.

Martha Elizabeth Murdock was born January 26, 1844, to Irish immigrants Robert Murdock and Elizabeth Richards.³ Murdock emigrated to Philadelphia in 1825 where he met Richards, who had been born at the same Irish parish as he had, though they had never met in

¹ September 19, 1894.

² Rankin MacMillan, et al., "The Diaries of Martha McMillan," 2.

³ Rankin MacMillan, et al., "The Diaries of Martha McMillan," 4, 10.

Ireland.⁴ Murdock and Richards married in 1835 and moved to a 225 acre farm in Wayne Township, Clinton County where Martha was born.⁵ When Martha was thirteen, the Murdocks moved again in 1857 to a farm of 117 acres in Cedarville Township,⁶ a town known for the quality of its farmland, produce, and animal stock.⁷ Here, Martha lived nearly her entire life. Martha's parents were committed to the Reformed Presbyterian ("Covenanter") church and ensured that "their children were reared in accordance with the rigid tenets of that faith."⁸ Like her brother Hugh, Martha was raised in a Republican household.⁹ While her political affinities later changed to the Temperance movement, Martha remained a faithful member of the Reformed Presbyterian church her entire life. While her brother Hugh raised sheep in the midwest and south,¹⁰ and her brother David became a minister in the Reformed Presbyterian church in Minnesota,¹¹ her other siblings remained in Cedarville with her for most of their lives. John farmed in Cedarville Township until his death; thereafter, Silas took control of his farm,¹² and Martha's sister Mary Murdock, a frequent visitor to the McMillan farm, lived in Cedarville and would occasionally stay there with Martha.¹³ Mary boarded Cedarville College students in her Xenia Avenue home and, like Martha, was known for her advocacy of temperance.¹⁴ The McMillan family continued to build their relationship with the college as six of the seven

⁴ Broadstone, vol. 2, 893.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 207.

⁷ Broadstone, vol. 1, 332.

⁸ Ibid., 893.

⁹ Ibid., 208.

¹⁰ Broadstone, vol. 2, 207-208.

¹¹ Ibid., 893.

¹² Ibid., 893.

¹³ Ibid., 894; August 1893.

¹⁴ Murdoch, 48-49.

graduates of the 1911 class, despite none sharing the McMillan name, “were all offshoots of the MacMillan clan.”¹⁵

In her youth, Martha Murdock was considered one of the most beautiful women in Greene County.¹⁶ She married James McMillan on January 15, 1867, when she was 24 and he was 35.¹⁷ The marriage itself was a small affair, the pair stopping that afternoon at the house of the Reverend Morton, whose sermons Martha attended and described in her journals for the next several decades.¹⁸ Martha’s father, strict Covenanter Robert Murdock, reportedly disapproved of the marriage due to their age difference and James’ supposedly worldly nature.¹⁹ James was known for purchasing “tailor-made” clothing and wearing shoes of the “finest leather.”²⁰ He was also known for his partiality for thoroughbred high-stepping horses and the latest carriages.²¹ Despite her father’s objection, Martha and James married and spent nearly fifty years of their marriage out on their farm. Perhaps James’ fashionable manner attracted Martha in the first place for she too was concerned with fine appearances. Over the course of their marriage, Martha regularly re-papered and re-carpeted the house when the family could afford the luxury,²² and, in 1884, she even had the roof of the dining room and kitchen removed to be redone during the rainy fall season.²³ Martha extended hospitality to many visitors who came to the house and who must have appreciated these many changes.

¹⁵ Elmer Jurkat quoted in Murdoch, 51.

¹⁶ Jason McMillan, 22.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Jan. 15, 1867.

¹⁹ Jason McMillan, 22.

²⁰ Ibid., 20.

²¹ Ibid., 20.

²² November 7, 1867; February 19, 1884; February 7, 1893.

²³ Oct., 1884.

Carpenters and other workmen who built steps, doors, and barns for the McMillan farm came and went as well as community members, family, and friends. Martha McMillan faithfully recorded all the people's names who entered her home in her journals for future readers. The McMillan's hospitality extended beyond their community to the travelers wandering along their road, including a drunk Dutchman who papered their house, African-Americans who came searching for work, and a traveling German who performed odd jobs around the house.²⁴ In Martha's own words, daily life on the farm was always "very busy." When the family was not home and were out and about themselves, they made many trips to the surrounding towns such as Cedarville, Xenia, Springfield, Selma, and Jamestown.²⁵

Martha's journals records both the McMillan farm's flourishing and failures throughout her life. The farm yielded crops such as apples, pumpkins, hay, wheat, and potatoes and housed animals including cows, sheep, chickens, and bees.²⁶ Martha's journals also depict the struggles on the farm. For instance, when many sheep wandered onto the railroad and were killed by a train, Martha wondered if the accident occurred because her family failed to keep the Sabbath.²⁷ The McMillans endured their worst suffering during the financial panics of 1873 and 1893.²⁸ While, before the 1873 crisis, James McMillan owned bank stock, city property, and was one of the richest men in Greene County, earning the nickname "Sheep Jim McMillan,"²⁹ he gradually lost most of his wealth. By the end of the financial crisis of 1893 which "tried [James McMillan]

²⁴ May/June/September, 1884.

²⁵ June 21, 1873.

²⁶ 1868 Journal.

²⁷ Journal May 1868.

²⁸ Jason 20-21.

²⁹ Ibid, 20.

to the breaking point,” the McMillans only retained their original homestead through mortgaging the property.³⁰

As she recorded the daily events of her life, Martha evidenced her care and concern for her children Fannie, Fred, Harlan, Homer, Clara, Clayton, Jason, and Paul who consistently appeared in her writing. Martha frequently commented in the journals about their educational status and academic achievements. For Martha, education was important to her children’s moral development. When Homer started school, for example, she stated her hope that he would become a gentleman and do his mother proud.³¹ Her children’s schooling was so integral to their lives that, even when the mortgage of the farm and the financial situation of the family weighed heavily upon her after the economic crises 1893, she would have readily sacrificed the farm if it ever hindered her children’s access to higher education.³² Martha’s role as a mother still caused her grief and sorrow in other ways. In 1878, she gave birth to a sickly female infant who died fifteen days later, unnamed.³³ Two-year-old Florence also died of illness in 1888.³⁴ Probably the most horrific blow was when her son Paul died at age 19 away from the family, and Martha, as she described later in her journal, waited grief-stricken for Paul’s body to come in on the Cedarville train.³⁵ In each of these instances, Martha turned towards her profound and steadfast faith for comfort and reassurance in the midst of sorrow.³⁶ Martha often considered death in the same way, saying, “Death is the way to life. If I were to remain always in this world we could

³⁰ Ibid, 21.

³¹ October, 1884.

³² Jason McMillan, 23-24.

³³ October, 1878.

³⁴ November, 1888.

³⁵ May 26-27, 1910.

³⁶ October 8, 1913

not enjoy the life beyond. Life is to be reached through death in the eternal world as well as in the natural world.”³⁷ Her strength in these low moments displays her resilience and faith.

As Martha processed each part of her day, her reliance on God manifested itself in her reflections. As a woman of faith and education, Martha wrote about the sermons she heard in the journal, quoted poetry, and applied what she had learned to her own experiences. For example, after Reverend Morton’s sermon on March 27, 1893, she wrote, “Let us remember that God reigns. God is on the throne. The claim of God upon you out rules every other claim_ To be sensible and alive to this thought as we should will mend all that is wrong in the home state or church or the world.”³⁸ Through writing about these sermons, Martha both reproduced the ideas in her own words and expounded on her own theology. Furthermore, she frequently applied the text to her own life, providing insight into her personal thought life and how she sought to change herself and influence the world around her. Her desire to influence the world spiritually was evidenced through Martha’s involvement with local Sabbath Schools, especially the Sabbath School she established on her own on the McMillan property where she taught children to grow spiritually. Her influence also extended to the Women’s Christian Temperance Union of which she became an active member.

Martha also manifested her spirituality through her involvement with the Women’s Christian Temperance Union. W.C.T.U. chapters were often at the local level “the main champion of women's rights.”³⁹ She believed, like many others, that “it is high time” that women should become involved in the politics through voting and holding office.⁴⁰ Martha also explained her temperance convictions and thoughts on motherhood in a speech she delivered at

³⁷ Jason McMillan, 23.

³⁸ March 27, 1893.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Rankin MacMillan, “The Diaries of Martha McMillan,” 18

the W.C.T.U. convention in Lyons, Indiana in July 1899.⁴¹ Here, Martha addressed a group of women, charging them to become involved with the white ribbon army, a group composed “mostly of Mothers whose hands are full at home” who pledged to advocate for temperance within and beyond their home.⁴² To the women in Indiana, Martha proclaimed two charges: “1” They can set their faces as a flint against the open sins and wrongs of their own town and community. 2” They can do evangelistic work through the Flower mission.”⁴³ Additionally, she charged the mothers of the convention with direct conviction. For Martha, the greatest changes women could bring upon society began at home with their children.⁴⁴ She urged them to “Teach a child to pray as soon as it can lisp its mothers name—Teach it to love and reverence the Bible . . . Teach them obedience.”⁴⁵ More so, Martha believed a mother should remain faithful to her teaching—as Martha modeled with the rearing of her own children—because “a mother must first reform herself” in order to model for her children how Jesus can “even our falls and sins and make them into a beautiful life and character.”⁴⁶

Martha faced many struggles toward the end of her life. With Paul’s death in 1910 from tuberculosis and James’ death in 1912, she was confronted with the grief of losing her son and her husband in a short span of time. In her later years, poor health limited Martha’s mobility, leaving her confined to a bed or chair and required her to be carried up and down the stairs of her home.⁴⁷ Perhaps one of the most difficult times for Martha in the last years of her life was moving out of the farm and allowing Clayton and his wife to take over the homestead.⁴⁸ The

⁴¹ Ibid., 19.

⁴² July 25, 1899.

⁴³ July 25, 1899.

⁴⁴ WCTU address 2.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 2-3.

⁴⁷ September, 1912.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

home she had invested so much time and energy in was no longer hers, and it seems that the transition was difficult for Martha. Martha's life ended in Kenton, Ohio where she was receiving treatment at a private hospital.⁴⁹ She died there on August 12, 1913. Martha still recorded the events of each day until two weeks before her death. An unknown writer completed the 1913 journal after her death, writing, "May we not indulge in the hope that she is still looking forward to another and more blessed homecoming when all including those already there will constitute an unbroken circle with no more separations."⁵⁰ Martha's life is a testament to a life well lived, one that practiced faith and persistence. Her journals reveal the significance of an ordinary person's life and represent one woman's legacy that will continue to inspire those who read her story.

⁴⁹ July 7, 1913

⁵⁰ August 10, 1913.

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